

Feb 22 – First Sunday In Lent

Genesis 9:8-17      A Bow in The Heaven

The rainbow is reassuring at one level but at another it is challenging. It says God needs to be reminded to not flood the earth again.

The following is an excerpt from Frederick Buechner's book "[\*Beyond Words\*](#)."

"THE WATERS HAD ALL DRAINED off and the ground was dry again when God hung a rainbow in the sky to remind him he'd promised 'that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood' (Genesis 9:11). The way he explained it to Noah, 'I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature that is upon the earth' (9:13).

In one way, then, it gave Noah a nice warm feeling to see the rainbow up there, but in another way it gave him an uneasy twinge. If God needed the rainbow as a reminder, he thought, that could mean that, if someday God didn't happen to look in the right direction or had something else on his mind, he might forget his promise and the heavy drops would start pattering down on the roof a second time...

With the rainbow tied around his little finger to jog his memory, surely God would never forget what he'd said. No matter what new meanness people might think up, surely the terrible thing would never happen again."

That is the challenging and yet hopeful message of the rainbow. Today I want to explore this story just a bit more. The first question I had was why this story to begin the season of Lent? I often follow the lectionary which is a suggested three year cycle of scripture readings that help us to explore all the major themes of the Bible. When the committee chose this passage for this day they had a reason. I believe that as Lent talks about our journey from darkness to light, from sin to forgiveness, from loss to hope they saw in the story of Noah, the flood, and particularly in the meaning of the rainbow those themes as well. As we begin our Lenten journey let this story lead us, challenge us and, most of all, give us hope.

We begin with the reminder that God loves us. Like Noah we need to have that nice warm feeling Buechner talks about. God had protected Noah and seen him through the flood. God was promising him a future where he or his descendants did not need to fear this kind of event again. The rainbow was a symbol of hope and love. We have all

had our times in the ark, battered by the storms of life. During those times we are in survival mode. We are hanging on, just waiting for the storms to abate and the dry land to appear. When this finally happens, if we look for it, we will find signs of reassurance, that God was with us in the storm, is with us now, and pointing us forward to a better tomorrow. Think of your life and what are your rainbows, your reminders of God's love and hope?

One for me is Mt. Baker. Just after my father died I went for a hike. It promised stunning views of the mountain, or so the guidebook said. I had walked several miles, mostly uphill, with no views to reward my effort. I was on the verge of turning back. I decided I would go around the next turn in the trail and then head home. You probably guess what I saw as the trail curved, the most majestic view of the mountain I had ever seen. It was a clear beautiful day and the mountain felt like it was so close I could reach out and touch it. All of a sudden the trek upwards, the view, my father's death all came together. I felt God with me, I was back on solid ground. I was ready to turn and head down the mountain with new hope.

As much as we want to end the story here with its message of love and assurance as Buechner said, it is also a reminder that God calls upon us to live faithfully. We recall the reasons behind the flood. The people had lived wickedly and God decided to start over again. As much as God loves us, God also realized that the chances of us being more faithful than those who had gone before Noah wasn't very good. That is why the rainbow. God realized that God would need reminding to be patient when things don't go so well. But God had hope. God told Noah what to do and God knew that Noah had it within him to be faithful.

The same is true for us. God knows what we are capable of. God wants us to do the best. The rainbow is a reminder to all of us that we are called to be faithful and loving, doing what God wants. I am not sure how often we think this way. Too often the rainbow is seen only as a reassuring message of God, but it is also a challenge as well.

Part of the hard news of this story is that even though we are called to be faithful, and we know we should be faithful, we fail. This is a word that we don't like to hear. Oh

we know it is true but knowing and hearing are two different things. Yet, if failure was not a possibility, you might say a probability, God would not need the rainbow as a reminder. When you move a little further in the story of Noah you find out that failure happens very quickly for him.

But, and here for me is the positive part of the story, once we realize that, yes, we fail, the rainbow is a reminder that we are offered grace. You might be thinking, Where do you get that idea? There is nothing about grace and forgiveness in the story of the rainbow. But think of this. God uses the image of the rainbow to remember not to destroy the world again. This means God is committed to us and is going to work with us. There is no more, they are hopeless, let's clean the slate and start all over again. If God is going to hang in there with us, even knowing we are going to fail, that means God will forgive; will give us another chance; will give us grace.

This is part of the Lenten journey. We begin with receiving ash on our foreheads with the reminder that we have sinned and we will die. But we also hear messages that we are forgiven and new life awaits. We journey from our death to life during Lent. So for me, the rainbow is also a reminder of grace, a reminder that God is invested in the world, that God is about transforming the world, that God loves us. God will not turn from us in our failures but instead offers us forgiveness and encouragement and life. This was much of the message that Jesus came to share. It was radical then and it still is now.

Many Christians hold a view that the world is so tainted and evil it is past redemption. They believe that God is just waiting for the end time to start all over again. This was never the message of Jesus or the message God gave to Noah. These Christians have allowed the metaphorical visions of the Book of Revelation to become reality instead of story. Noah heard that God was going to be invested in our world. God sent Jesus because God loves the world. God wants us to be faithful and love the world. God knows that we sin. Jesus came to remind us that God forgives us for our sins. Jesus came to remind us that God's grace is triumphant and we are called to live into this vision of grace and redemption.

Let me rephrase the story of the good Samaritan to help you understand this redemptive view. A man was going for Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell among thieves who beat him and stripped him and left him by the side of the road half dead. Along came a priest and, seeing the man, decided that he had to have made poor decisions to get into such a mess. He didn't feel it was his job to get involved. He was receiving the just punishment for his sins and so he walked to the other side of the road and went on by. Likewise a Levite came by. He felt that the world was an evil place where evil things happened. You couldn't do anything about it. Bad things happen. He had to try as hard as he could to be good and stay away from evil so he crossed over to the other side of the road and hurried by, hoping the bandits would not fall on him as well. Then a Samaritan came and saw the man in distress. He had compassion. He felt that his job was to help people. So he got off his donkey, helped the man and took him to an inn where he could be taken care of. He did not pass moral judgments on the man, he didn't pass judgments on the world, he just did what was right. He offered help and grace to one in need knowing at some time he would be the one needing that grace and love.

Jesus' parables are about grace, about second chances, about God's love and protection. The rainbow is a symbol of how God does not give up on us but is with us and challenging us to live faithfully but also, willing to forgive us when we fail. During this season of Lent may we again hear God's love for us and for all, and in our journey to life share this love with others.

May we be comforted and challenged by the rainbow today and always.